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### *Finding Support and Negotiating Identity*

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Cara Williams et Sarah Riley

## **Finding Support and Negotiating Identity**

An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Newbie Posts and their Elicited Replies on Five Pro-Eating Disorder Websites

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# Finding Support and Negotiating Identity

An Analysis of the Structure and Content of Newbie Posts and their Elicited Replies on Five Pro-Eating Disorder Websites

## Introduction

- 1 The cultural stigmatism that is often associated with eating disorders can result in sufferers feeling isolated (Gavin, Rodham & Poyer, 2008; Walsh & Malson, 2010). But this isolation is potentially mediated by the development of pro-eating disorder online communities that are created through interactive forums where members share experiences and offer support (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Dias, 2003; Juarascio *et al.*, 2010). Access to these forums though is dependent on successfully negotiating entry, the processes of which are the focus of this paper.
- 2 Those who want to interact on pro-eating disorder related forums have to successfully negotiate entry, which previous research suggests may be difficult (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009). The present paper develops this work with an analysis of the patterns of first posts on pro-eating disorder related forums and the replies that they received, providing an exploration of the interactional patterns in such online spaces and some of the processes of how newcomers integrate into these forums.
- 3 Pro-eating disorder forums have been portrayed as potentially dangerous in both popular media and academia because they are understood as encouraging the development and maintenance of eating disorders (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008; Martijn *et al.*, 2009). Other research has found that these forums allow isolated individuals to come together, share ideas, and mediate against the isolation that people with eating disorders may experience, offering places of positive support away from public scrutiny (Csipke & Horne, 2007; Dias, 2003; Juarascio, Shoaib & Timko, 2010). Because online eating disorder communities are diverse, this variation in research findings may, in part, reflect the range of ideological frameworks for constructing eating disorders that are represented across the different eating disorders related forums (Walsh & Malson, 2010).
- 4 This variation in research findings may, in part, reflect the significant differences between eating disorder related forums in how they construct eating disorders, which in turn impacts on the behavioral norms of their participants.
- 5 Pro-ED forums have explicit and implicit frameworks for understanding eating disorders, and these ideological standpoints structure what members, and where relevant, moderators consider appropriate interactional behavior on these forums. At one end of the spectrum there is a corpus of websites concerned with eating disorders from a medical perspective, which often draw on a medically oriented recovery framework, constructing people with eating disorders as suffering an illness and as needing to seek help. Others are concerned with more ambivalent purposes, which may or may not include support for recovery. At the other end of the spectrum there are websites described as ‘pro’-eating disorder/anorexia/bulimia (pro-ED/ana/mia). Pro-ED sites are often user-led and reject the notion of recovery in favour of an ideology constructing eating disorders as a lifestyle choice, in which the development or maintenance of disordered eating is encouraged. It is this latter group that has elicited a media uproar (Dias, 2003; Martijn *et al.*, 2009), but it has also encouraged research into a phenomenon unique to the Internet age (Giles, 2006).
- 6 The rapid development of these online pro-ED forums has been met with significant research on the content of these forums and the effects they may have on users (for a comprehensive review see Casilli, Tubaro & Araya, 2012). But further study is required to understand the social processes and functions of these online spaces and to track ongoing trends, as these forums represent varied communities that are “transient and fluid” in their nature (Dias, 2003: 31, see also Kozinets, 2010, for a detailed discussion of the nature of online communities).
- 7 A fruitful avenue for analyzing disordered eating related identity management and construction on these sites has been the application of various kinds of textual analyses

(discourse, conversation, textual or interpretative phenomenological) on the language used by participants. For example, Riley, Rodham & Gavin (2009) identified a process by which more established members of a pro-ana site reframed other members' health or appearance concerns (e.g. hair loss) as a sign they were 'doing it right'.

- 8 The role of current members in policing newcomers (known as 'newbies') entering online forums is well established in analyses of computer-mediated communication (e.g. Boostrom, 2008). Existing community members often construct or respond to newbies in negative terms because newbies usually lack knowledge of the social (and sometimes technical) ways of how the specific online space that they are entering works. The newbie is therefore a risky subject position, vulnerable to resistance or rejection by more established members of the online communities in which he/she attempts to participate (Boostrom, 2008; Giles, 2006).
- 9 Research on newbies on pro-ED forums suggests that when they first join a site they must legitimise their attempt to join the community in order to be accepted (Giles, 2006; Stommel & Koole, 2010; Stommel & Meijman, 2011). For example, they might describe symptoms or diagnosis concurrent with disordered eating or be understood as sharing something in common with already established ideological positions of the framework for making sense of eating disorders (e.g. as recovery or lifestyle choice) with the sites they are attempting to join (Riley *et al.*, 2009; Stommel & Koole, 2010). But there is little understanding of the specific structure and patterns of newbie talk that leads to more or less successful acceptance by already established members.
- 10 Understanding how legitimacy is managed discursively by both newbies and current members on what is now a distinguishable anorectic and bulimic online public space (Casilli *et al.*, 2012), enables an exploration of the function and interactive processes of these sites that is essential for understanding how online spaces work and how newcomers integrate into such forums. It is also an important process for the newbies themselves, given that these forums may provide significant psychological support not found elsewhere (Dias, 2003). This paper therefore explores the management of newbie integration with the following research questions:

1. What are the patterns of postings by newbies on a range of pro-ED forums?
2. What are the patterns in responses by existing members to newbies' postings?
3. What can these patterns tell us about the process of newbie identity negotiation?

## Method

### Procedure

- 11 The data was collected from five eating disorder forums. These forums were identified through searching for terms such as "pro-eating disorder", "pro-ED forums", and "pro-ana forums" into Yahoo! and Google search engines. The searches yielded a number of links to websites, forums, chat rooms, news articles, and online journals. An initial list of twenty-seven forums that did not require a username or password were selected for further study. These forums were monitored for a one-week period to establish which sites were most active and popular, constituted by multiple daily updates through new threads and posted replies. This selection criterion was used to identify the five most active forums, as frequent postings would increase the likelihood of seeing negotiations being made.
- 12 Data collection took place over a one-month period, with posts on all five forums being copied each day and saved into a database. 'Post' is the term for the message put on the online forum, and the 'poster' is the author of this message. At the end of the one-month period, the data was printed in preparation for analysis. This corpus consisted of 38,148 words across the five forums.

### Ethics

- 13 This method of data collection, whereby the researcher does not actively participate in the discourse on the forums, is known as 'lurking' (Day & Keys; Riley *et al.*, 2009). Because the

forums used did not require a password or username informed consent was not sought as the data was considered available in the public domain, where participants of the activities studied could ‘reasonably expect to be observed by strangers’ (British Psychological Society, 2006: 13). In order to protect the anonymity of the members, the posters’ data were anonymised and the forums are not named in this paper, but, brief details on the characteristics of each forum are described in table 1. In terms of risks to the researcher, counseling was available due to the emotive content of the data. Ethical approval was awarded by Aberystwyth University in which the researchers worked.

**Table 1: Forum content used in data collection**

Forum no.	Format of forum	Ideological position	Rules and location of rules	ED issue(s) addressed
1	Welcome page with links to smaller sub-forums, each focusing on different areas, such as anorexia, bulimia, open chat.	Unspecific, but both pro-ana and recovery ideologies reproduced on site	No explicit set of rules.	‘Doing’ or ‘being’ ED properly/ correctly. Advising against ED and providing support for those seeking help.
2	Welcome page with links to smaller sub-forums, each focusing on different areas, such as anorexia, bulimia, EDNOS (Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified).	Strictly against pro-ED.	Rules include: no numbers/figures; no asking for pro-ED help. Located in sub-forum welcome pages, not main welcome page.	Providing support for those seeking help for ED. Advising against ED.
3	All forum threads together on welcome page, not divided by specific content.	Strictly against pro-ED.	No explicit set of rules.	Providing support for those seeking help for ED. Advising against ED.
4	All forum threads together on welcome page, not divided by specific content.	Strictly against pro-ED.	Rules include: no numbers allowed; no pro-ED/ questionable avatars allowed; no food lists; no ‘triggering’ threads. Located above the list of threads.	Providing support for those seeking help for ED. Advising against ED.
5	All forum threads together on welcome page, not divided by specific content.	Unspecific, but both pro-ana and recovery ideologies reproduced on site	No explicit set of rules.	‘Doing’ or ‘being’ ED properly/ correctly. Advising against ED and providing support for those seeking help.

## Sample Bias

14

Because of the secretive and transient nature of pro-ED sites there is limited reliable webometric data (Casilli *et al.*, 2012), but previous research suggests that, typically, users of English language forums tend to originate from the UK, USA and Australia, be female and below the age of 40 (Dias, 2003; Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Gailey, 2009; Riley *et al.*, 2009). It was assumed therefore that the majority of posters in our data corpus were within this demographic and entered the sites because at some level they identified as experiencing disordered eating. However, the anonymity of computer-mediated communication means that we may have included communication from people who participated for other reasons or who did not meet the typical demographic. The posters were, however, all people who chose to enter publicly-accessible pro-ED forums, and analysis of their responses therefore cannot further an understanding of communication practices in members-only online forums.

## Method of Analysis

- 15 The corpus was read to identify newbie posts. These were defined as posts in which people described themselves as new to the site (for example, “*I’m new to this whole Anorexia and bulimia stuff*” (Forum 1) or “*Hi. I’m new here*” (Forum 2), or the first identifiable time they posted within a forum thread that was specifically newbie-related (for example, threads with titles such as “*newbie..... on a slippery spiral*” (Forum 4)). All messages that met these criteria were included, as were any subsequent responses from other members or discussions between the newbie and existing members. The dataset that was analysed was thus a collection of newbie posts together with the dialogue that they initiated up until that conversation appeared to have ended (e.g. no more posts to a thread). This process of data organisation also allowed us to avoid content duplication.
- 16 To identify overall patterns in these newbie posts, and others’ responses to them, basic descriptive statistics and structural linguistic analysis were performed on the dataset (identifying, for example, the percentage of newbie posts that were ‘one-off’ versus multiple postings). Discourse analysis was then employed to explore the content and implications for identity management of these posts. The discourse analysis drew on Potter & Wetherell’s (1987) analytics of construction, variation and function, so that the posts were analysed in terms of the linguistic devices used to construct a particular standpoint, understanding, or identity; the variation in these constructions; and the consequence or function of using one construction over another in terms of the kinds of responses these posts elicited (Wiggins & Riley, 2010). The discourse analysis we employ is informed by social constructionism, in which language is understood as a social process, so that identity is produced through language and in interaction, and is only ever partially formed since it is reliant on others for a particular construction/identity claim to be accepted interactively (Stainton *et al.*, 1995).
- 17 The discourse analysis was performed first by repeatedly reading the data and then and coding it for content (e.g. request for help); codes were then subsumed into more overarching categories and a body of instances were identified that represented these categories. The discourse analysis produced two overarching themes in which the posts functioned to co-construct an understanding of the online eating disorder community or of a disordered eating identity. Extracts that exemplified these categories are presented below and analysed in terms of how newbies talk appeared to mobilize understanding and identities in ways that increased or decreased their likelihood of being accepted onto the forum.

## Results

### Patterns in Responses by Existing Members to Newbie Postings

- 18 Thirty percent of all postings were from newbies and all opening posts were responded to (see table one). These responses elicited at least one further response from the newbie on 57 % of occasions, so that 43 % of identifiable newbie posts were single ‘one-off’ posts. The average number of one-off posts across the forums was 5 and the range was 3 (Forum 2) to 15 (Forum 1).
- 19 One-off postings were responded to in one of two ways that worked to stop newbies engaging further with these sites. First, established members invited the respondent to form a private relationship, for example the post that finished with “I kinda want a buddy...Some one please help me!” was followed with the response “I’d love to help you...email me at [email address]” (Forum 1). From this pattern of communication we conclude that a significant function of these public ED sites is to enable individuals to meet in order to form personal relationships elsewhere. As such, it may be useful to draw a parallel with dating websites when thinking about one of the functions of contemporary pro-eating disorder sites (for further elaboration see discussion section below).

**Table 2: Postings on each forum from declared newbies that elicited a response from existing members**

Forum	1	2	3	4	5
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Percentage ( %) of postings from newbies that were responded to by existing members	100	100	100	100	100
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- 20 The second form of response to one-off newbie postings took the form of a warning about the content they had posted. For example, in forum two that had explicit rules (see table one) a post that included the phrase *“at least one of those will tell that I’m think [thin] enough. I have a long way to do...and I’ll need your help”* was responded to with *“We...will not help you... take some time to read over the rule”* (Forum 2).
- 21 These one-off postings and their replies are read as indicating that the newbie was either accepted, leading to movement to a private space, or, on receiving a warning response that constructed them as transgressing the rules or behavioural norms of the site (as in the example above of failing to follow explicit site rules), understood themselves as not being immediately accepted on the site. For many, these warnings led to them not trying again at that point. This suggests that these newbies may feel that they have failed in their pursuit of acceptance onto the forum, which is enough to put them off attempting again, or that this site was not what they were looking for. So, while acceptance posts were often responded to with content that emphasised support, connection and empathy between the newbie and established member, ‘warning’ posts acted as a vehicle for managing interactional behavior on the sites. These themes of support and interactional management were also evident in responses to newbies that produced a return reply.
- 22 Fifty seven percent of responses to newbie first posts elicited at least a second posting from the newbie, and often a discussion between the newbie and one or more other members. The average number of multiple posters across the forums was 6.6 and the range of multiple posters was 2 (Forum 5) to 10 (Forums 1 and 4).
- 23 Responses to newbie first posts that led to further interaction have been categorized into two overarching discourses. The first discourse ‘constructing community’ worked to construct the site as an eating disorder community characterised by a set of behavioural values that oriented around support and connection. The second discourse ‘constructing identity’ represented talk that co-constructed a particular eating disordered figure (for example, as addicted, socially excluded or recognisably thin). These discourses were used by newbie and more established members to construct and evaluate the legitimacy of the newbie in joining these sites, and are discussed in more detail below.

### *Constructing Community 1: Offering Support and Establishing Connection*

- 24 Responses that drew on the community discourse tended to respond to newbies’ first posts as genuine, both in terms of demonstrating a struggle with weight or food and that their struggle was one shared by other members of the site. The majority of responses across all forums other than forum 5, were of this kind (see table three), the content of these responses differed across the forums depending on how they constructed eating disorders (e.g. as in need of recovery or life style choice) and so varied from giving support for those who wish to engage in disordered eating (for example, food restriction) to those that encouraged seeking professional help and recovery.

**Table 3: Responses to newbies offering support and establishing connection.**

Forum	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage ( %) of responses to newbies offering support and establishing connection	87.5	75	66.6	83.3	0

- 25 Examples of pro-ana responses to newbies included *“If you’re looking for a buddy, I’d be happy to tell you how I got started”* and *“I think that’s awesome that you’ve found something*

*that works for you!*" (both from forum 1). These quotes exemplify the way offers of support were often made in ways that constructed the existing member as more knowledgeable and thus able to take the newbie through the processes involved in developing an eating disorder. (*I'd be happy to tell you how I got started*).

26 Terms like 'buddy' were used frequently, creating a sense of friendliness and connection between the newbie and more established member. 'Awesome' in the above quote also functions to construct the newbie's attempts to engage in significant food restriction for the purposes of developing an eating disorder as a significant achievement, and a behavioural practice valued by those on the site. Thus support is offered, connection between the newbie and members is made, and the ideological standpoint of the site is reproduced (through adherence to the explicit or implicit rules of participating on the sites).

27 We identified a similar pattern of offering support and constructing connection between newbies and existing members on sites, which used more recovery oriented frameworks for constructing eating disorders. Examples of such responses to newbies included "*well done for reaching out for help...you can always PM [personal message] me*" (Forum 3) and "*Sorry things have been tough for you, hun*" (Forum 4). These illustrate how support is employed to encourage those trying to combat their eating disorder. Using terms and phrases such as 'PM me' and the term of endearment 'hun' again functioned to construct a connection between the newbie and established member, so that on all the sites successful newbie first posters were very quickly treated as accepted members of the forum. Often there were explicit statements of identification and connection made by established members in response to a newbie post. For example "*i think a lot of us can relate to the "confident by day, insecure by night"*" (Forum 1) exemplifies the construction of shared experience both in terms of the specific experience (confident/insecure) and through the personal pronoun 'us' which includes the newbie into the site's membership. Another example of a shared identification is given in the extract below.

#### Extract 1

DAG: im a guy and i just started this it would be nice to talk to another guy and get help...

email me [email address]

NS: Hi. Welcome. Us men are definitely in the minority.

PTH: You have a third guy on here now...We could use this thread to talk if you want.

(Forum 1)

28 In extract one DAG constructs two identities – as male (*im a guy*) and as someone new to disordered eating (*i just started this*). He is responded to by NS in a way that apparently legitimises his entry by being welcomed (*welcome*) and included through the use of the personal pronoun 'us'. That DAG should orient to his gender as relevant is also legitimised, with NS responding to the salience of the identification (*Us men are ...in the minority*). However, it is interesting to note that DAG's request for help through private communication (*email me*) is not fulfilled. Instead, PTH suggests using this public site (*We could use this thread to talk*), perhaps because the other members want to share their experiences more publicly or because these members require further interaction to establish DAG's legitimacy for a shift to private communication, given that he offers little of himself from which the others can judge his claim for minority status (men) within this stigmatised community (eating disordered).

29 DAG was therefore offered a managed entry into this online world. And since he does not take up PTH's invitation to use the current site for further discussion, his attempt to gain acceptance at the level he requested was not successful. A more successful attempt at creating shared identification is offered in the next extract.

#### Extract 2

BS: I need some serious help. I am 5'3 and 151 lbs. I know, I'm huge :/ I really want someone to be able to keep in touch with and help motivate me not to snack and eat! I told myself I'd be 120 lbs by the time school starts (in 2 weeks) at the beginning of the summer and have let myself fail I just need someone to be there for me. If anyone wants to talk my email is [email address]



MG: You and I are in practically the exact same boat, I'm 5'4 and Between 150 and 155, I have used two scales telling me two different things within a week and a half. I wanted to be at 118 or 120 before Sept 6 (first day of grade 10). If you wanna talk feel free to email me at [email address]

BS: I'd love to talk to you and help each other out! Shoot me an email

PC: I'm the same! I'm about 155 and 5'4" last time I checked. I need some motivation, so I'll email you if that's cool. I'm [email address]

(Forum 1)

- 30 Unlike DAG in extract 1, here the newbie 'BS' offers significant detail of her physical and social situation, and her post elicits a shared identification with a more established member. Both the posters (newbie and established member) are approximately the same height and weight, have a similar target goal, and a sense of failure in meeting it. BS requests help via more private communication, and again unlike DAG, her request is accepted (*feel free to email me*). BS's newbie post is thus successful in what she asks for through a process in which the information she offers elicits identification in another member.

### Constructing Community 2: Managing Behavioural Rules

- 31 As well as offering support and constructing connection, more established members of the group also responded to newbie postings with replies that policed the explicit or implicit rules of the site. For example, a newbie post to Forum 2 which had explicit rules against pro-ED talk (see table one) that ended with "*Thnx for any...tips*" was responded to with "*Does **no one** read the rules of this site anymore?*". Another example, responding to a newbie's posting of her weight statistics was "*please take a look at the forum rules. Posting numbers is against the rules*" (Forum 4).

**Table 4: Responses to newbies that managed behavioural rules.**

Forum	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage ( %) of responses to newbies that managed behavioural rules	6.2	50	66.6	16.6	0

- 32 Unsurprisingly, forums with explicit rules (forums 2 and 4) or those with a strong anti pro-ED standpoint (forum 3) had higher incidences of these kinds of responses (see table four). In forums with explicit rules the moderators and seasoned users of the forums were quick to point out that the forum rules had been broken, although often in polite language, such as with the use of 'please' in the quote above. Forums without explicit rules often had implicit rules that were policed by members. For example, the response in forum 3 "*you may have an eating disorder, but obviously we can't diagnose you*" to a newbie constructs a particular understanding of the role of the forum that is an unchallengeable taken for granted (*obviously*), despite forum 3 having no explicit rules.
- 33 In politely policing the site, the community does not altogether reject the newbie who fails to receive legitimacy in their first post. Instead newbies are offered a chance to return if they are compliant with the rules or interactional expectations of others on the site. Sixty percent of newbies in this position did not respond to the criticism creating the significant number of the one-off newbie postings we described above.
- 34 In sum, newbies who were accepted onto these public sites often co-constructed with more established members that these sites were places of support for people experiencing problematic eating characterised by a normative expectation to offer and provide support to each other. Successful newbies gave enough information about themselves to elicit identification with other members, either in their first or subsequent postings. As well as demonstrating similarity with more established members, newbies often constructed themselves as needing support from members of the site, so that successful newbie posts apparently triggered both a sense of identification in other members and hailed within them an identity of being an expert. Newbies were also required to reproduce the social etiquette of the

forum, with talk that conflicted with explicit or implicit rules for behaviours being responded to in ways that policed these rules.

Our findings support previous research that suggests newbies must demonstrate legitimacy in being accepted onto these sites, and we have identified a process for doing this through the use of giving personal information on weight related issues that resonated with another member and making a direct request for help/support. Our analysis also demonstrates processes in which both eating disordered or recovery identities (depending on the framework of the sites) are developed and encouraged by existing members (see Riley *et al.*, 2009, for a discussion on pro ana and recovery sites as places for identity development).

In our data there was less suspicion of newbies than in Giles' (2006) study, instead newbies quickly gained legitimacy when entering these public sites, and even those whose first postings were not successful were often invited to try again, although many chose not to. This difference may be due to the changes in interactive norms on such forums and variation of these sites, and is also concurrent with a discourse of a caring community that was evoked on these sites.

## Constructing Identity

Where our first discourse 'constructing community' involved talk that offered support, established empathy and managed the behavioural expectations of participants, our second discourse, 'constructing identity', focused on co-constructing a particular kind of identity related to disordered eating (for example, as addicted or socially excluded), and also emerged in two forms as described below.

### *Constructing Identity 1: Articulating Legitimate Psychological or Physical Characteristics*

One strategy for newbie posts that led to acceptance and further interaction with members was to evoke a particular kind of psychological experience, which was used by established members to evaluate the legitimacy of newbie claims. In this kind of talk newbies described experiencing characteristics of eating disorders such as problems with control, obsession, addiction, experiencing ED as personification (e.g. "*having another voice in your head*" (Forum 4)), or a more generalised experience of being different (for example from "*regular people who like food*" (Forum 3)). As in talk that drew on the community discourse, this identity talk was also coupled with a request for help or to know if this was a shared experience. For example, "*am starting to find my habits are already becoming addictive. Is this how it all started for some of you?*" (Forum 1). This was a successful strategy in terms of being accepted onto the sites, and used more in forums 2, 3 and 4, the forums that were strickly against reproducing a pro-ED standpoints (see table five).

**Table 5: Posts by newbies constructing legitimate psychological/physical characteristics.**

Forum	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage ( %) of posts by newbies constructing legitimate psychological/ physical characteristics	31.3	75	66.6	83.3	0

The efficacy of this strategy appeared to be in the way it provided enough information for members to evaluate the legitimacy of the newbie attempting to join the site and because it hails the existing members through the discourse of community and support. In doing so, the newbie constructs themselves as having disordered eating; as requiring support from similar others; and that the members of these sites are the people that can provide this support.

In these posts a delicate balance is therefore managed in which newbies are able to both illustrate the similarities between themselves and the more experienced members, while also accounting for their newbie status since they need support. This suggests that in order for newbies to manage their identity negotiations and gain acceptance, they must

be knowledgeable enough to show a genuine understanding of ED experiences, but not knowledgeable enough to be questioned as to why they are a newbie.

As well as describing psychological experiences, some newbies also drew on descriptions of their physical characteristics to construct their legitimacy, for example, “*My BMI is extremely low (I won’t put exactly as I know that’s not allowed)*” (Forum 4). An analysis of how a participant legitimises her claim in relation to her body size when online and thus not able to be seen is given below (see Boero & Pascoe, 2012 and Riley *et al.*, 2009, for analyses of how the body is described and used interactively to claim membership in virtual eating disorder communities).

### Extract 3

BMG: ...unlike some, i am in the in crowd. and there is so much pressure on me to look perfect all the time. everyone tells me im skinny but, i really dont care what they think...can someone help give me tips on how to throw up easily? Its so good to be talking to people who wont judge me...

(Forum 1)

In extract three BMG makes a claim for having relevant body markers that support the legitimacy of her joining the site through the use of other’s voices and extreme case formulations ‘*everyone tells me im skinny*’. She also defines herself as part of the ‘*in-crowd*’ and constructs this identity as potentially distinct from other members (*unlike some*). This claim positions BMG as having potentially higher status than other members of the community, a somewhat dangerous move given her new status, but she also constructs herself as needing members’ support and speaks to their identities as non-judgemental supportive people (*Its so good to be talking to people who wont judge me*). Her strategy appears to work, since another member then responds to her request for ‘tips’ as if she is a legitimate member: “*I wouldn’t suggest bulimia, but for me I stick three fingers*”.

### Constructing Identity 2: Confused and Contradictory

While some newbies made identity claims that were accepted as evidence of eating disordered thinking or behavior, other newbies constructed themselves as confused and with contradictory experiences and understandings. Despite the ambiguity of their talk in terms of being able to claim legitimate membership on the sites (for example, “*I’m too fat & healthy to deserve help*”, Forum 4) these posts were often responded to with sympathy and offers of support, the quote above, for example, receiving the reply “*i am still here...and really do care*”. These posts occurred across all the forums, but were particularly prevalent on forum 5 (see table six), perhaps reflecting the contradictory nature of that particular site, which both advised against developing eating disorders and offered tips on how to develop one.

**Table 6: Posts by newbies that were confused and contradictory in presentation.**

Forum	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage of posts by newbies that were confused and contradictory in presentation	25	50	66.6	66.6	100

In sum, newbies must be able to demonstrate that they share the problems associated with eating disorders that are articulated throughout the forum; this seems to demonstrate to the more experienced users that they have a legitimate claim for joining the forum. Alternatively they can present a confused, contradictory and vulnerable persona that requires the help of more established members. An appropriate identity claim and request for support is thus a key process in negotiating successful entry onto these sites, creating responses such as “*You are ... welcome and NOT a fraud.*” (Forum 2).

## Discussion

There were clear patterns identified in the lengths, structure, and content of newbie posts across the studied forums. This regularity of features suggests that there is a specific way these

forums are used structurally, which appears to orient around identifying a partner for private communication, evoking particular ED related identities and/or reproducing or policing the explicit or implicit behavioural rules of the sites.

46 Newbie postings and responses to these postings could be categorised into those that produced single posts from the newbie and those that led to the newbie engaging further with the site. The single 'one-off' posts led either to an invitation to move to private communication channels or warnings to write in line with the rules of the sites. Newbie posts that led to further interaction on the sites were categorised into either those that employed a discourse of community, the responses evoked notions of support, connection and empathy; or those that drew on a discourse of identity that constructed the newbie within a particular set of sense-making about what it means to have disordered eating that was accepted by the existing members. This sense-making oriented around being thin/overweight and/or experiencing compulsion, addiction, being different, confused or contradictory, themes that have also been identified in previous research (Dias, 2003; Day & Keys, 2008; Giles & Newbold, 2011; Haas *et al.*, 2011).

47 There are four key findings from these results. First, our analysis supports and develops previous research that suggested that newbies need to demonstrate something in common with existing members of the online community in which they seek to participate (Stommel & Koole, 2010; Stommel and Meijman (2011). In our study, newbies who were accepted by more established users were able to articulate experiencing problems associated with eating disorders shared by other members of the forum and/or reproduce behavioural norms in line with how that particular forum constructed eating disorders (e.g. as something to recover from or something to be actively worked towards). Overall a pattern emerged in which successful entry into the sites was most likely if newbies gave enough information about themselves to elicit identification with them by another member, explicitly requested support or advice, and wrote in a way that complied with the explicit or implicit behavioural rules of the site.

48 Second, an important part of the interactions examined involved giving a dual role to established members, not only as managers of forum membership, but also as expert guides for the newbies. Success for a newbie attempting to negotiate entry into the forums was thus not only dependent on reproducing the values of the forum but also on providing space for the dual role of the established members.

49 Our third finding was that newbies generally received a favourable reception, with a much more immediate acceptance or opportunity to repair a problematic entry than was demonstrated in Giles' (2006) findings, whereby newbies were more vulnerable to being rejected. For example, labels such as 'wannabes' or 'fakers' that were prevalent in Giles' (*ibid.*) data, were absent in ours. Given that newbie is a risky identity across a range of online communities (Boostrom, 2008) including pro-ana communities (Boero & Pascoe, 2012) the positive responses we identify are a noteworthy shift in interactional styles on at least some pro-ED forums,.

50 The favourable reception newbies received on the sites we analysed may be read in relation to the community discourse that we identify as a significant part of the sense-making on these sites. In articulating a set of values around support, empathy and connection, the community discourse may then structure how more established members engage with newbies, so as to increase the likelihood of them producing a more supportive response than found elsewhere. This pattern may also be indicative of our sample bias from analysing public access sites. Given the more rigorous negotiation of membership required for private forums, it is not unrealistic to imagine that private sites may more actively police transgressions of rules and norms of those sites. Our analysis therefore cannot be generalized to private sites, since the different entry criteria of public and private pro-ED sites may create different kinds of online spaces, with different functions and normative behavioural expectations.

51 Our fourth finding is that in our analysis of newbie use of public pro-ED sites we made an analogy between these sites and dating websites, whereby newbies use pro-ED sites to identify similar others, and pair off for more private interactions. This finding has not been established elsewhere, but does support Dias' (2003) work, which emphasises the use of the internet for seeking support.

- 52 However, in comparison to online dating interactions, the exchanges we identify are much shorter. In adult internet dating those typically seeking a romantic partner usually engage in relatively prolonged online interaction in order for them to negotiate a successful balance between positive impression management and the need to present an authentic self that will be found acceptable in the anticipated face-to-face communication (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Farrer & Gavin, 2009). Our participants, by contrast, appear to require relatively little information before pairing up, perhaps because the relationship is more focused (on weight management), is likely to remain on-line, and has less significant implications if it fails.
- 53 There are thus significant differences between the discursive patterns in online adult dating and the disordered eating related 'dating' we describe in our data. However, the pattern of pairing up we identify does mimic features associated with adolescent 'cyber pickup': the process in which participants in adolescent chat rooms pair off for private dyadic Instant Message space (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004). Subrahmanyam *et al.* (*ibid.*) for example, note that a successful cyber pickup can require relatively little information other than *a/s/l* (age, sex, location) and an expressed desire to engage in sexually related chat. These findings have parallels with our own work, suggesting perhaps that once on relevant sites (pro-ED in our case or teen chat rooms for Subrahmanyam *et al.*, 2004) pairing up for online relationships can be negotiated with parsimony as long as the initial request is made by someone whose described characteristics resonate with somebody else on the forum.
- 54 The interactive processes that occur in private online spaces have generally not been analysed for ethical reasons related to consent (although, in relation to pro-ED forums, Brontsky & Giles (2006) report a study where they engaged in covert participatory observation). To ascertain any differences in patterns of interaction (how newbies negotiate entry, if a form of 'dating' still occurs) further research is required, perhaps through the use of interviews or focus groups with those who participate on publicly-accessible forums and private, member-only forums. Should researchers gain permission to lurk on private sites, comparisons between patterns of interaction on the private and public pro-ED sites would also help further explicate the role of these sites for both experienced and newbie participants, enabling a fuller exploration of the apparent diversity across pro-Ed websites in terms of how they construct eating disorders.
- 55 Popular media seems to portray 'pro-ED' websites, forums, and chat rooms as dangerous venues for vulnerable individuals to congregate and share ideas. However, the dataset used in this research was gained through an online search for forums using terms such as 'pro-ED' and 'pro-eating disorder'. On some forums, responses demonstrated support, connection and empathy oriented around a recovery framework, rather than encouragement for the development and maintenance of an eating disorder. Additionally, in some instances, there were explicit sets of rules that discouraged the use of stereotypical pro-ED talk, such as height and weight statistics, food lists, and questionable or borderline pro-ED avatars. This suggests that the media portrayal and actual uses of public pro-ED forums are potentially in conflict as to what it means to be 'pro-ED' and future research is necessary to explore this discrepancy.
- 56 To conclude, this research suggests that despite a relatively diverse set of online pro-ED forums, a reoccurring pattern on contemporary public access pro-ED sites occurs for successful newbie entry, which includes giving enough information about themselves to elicit identification with them by another member; explicitly requesting support or advice so as to give established members a role of guide as well as guardian of site membership, and writing in a way that reproduces explicit or implicit rules of the site. Further research might explore how generalizable this pattern is with other support oriented online communities. The study also highlights the way these forums change over time (Dias, 2003), since the newbies in this study were given more support by forum members than earlier research had identified (e.g. Giles, 2006), and shifts in the way the forums are now used, including 'cyber pickup' for those seeking a partner in their disordered eating.

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### ***Résumés***

Building on work that has identified the difficulties 'newbies' (people joining an internet forum for the first time) have in negotiating acceptance onto eating disorder related forums, the present study reports a discourse analysis and a descriptive statistical analysis of the structure and content of newbie first posts and the responses to them. Analysis of posts from five English language pro-ana sites, collated over the course of one month showed that all newbie posts were responded to, with 57 % percent eliciting further discussion between the newbie and other members. A reoccurring pattern for successful newbie entry was identified across these forums despite their relative diversity. Successful postings involved giving enough information about themselves to elicit identification from another member, explicitly requesting support or

advice so as to give established members a role of guide as well as guardian of site membership, and writing in a way that reproduced the sites' behavioural rules and ideological framing of eating disorders (e.g. a problem requiring recovery or a lifestyle choice). The study also highlights a dual role for these websites as both offering community support and a platform for 'cyber pickup' for those seeking a partner in their disordered eating.

### Trouver du soutien et négocier son identité. Une analyse des messages de nouveaux arrivants et de leurs réponses sur cinq sites consacrés aux désordres alimentaires.

Le présent article s'appuie sur des travaux ayant identifié les difficultés que connaissent les *newbies* (nouveaux arrivants sur un forum Internet) pour négocier leur acceptation sur des forums de discussion liés aux troubles alimentaires. Nous présentons une analyse de discours et des statistiques descriptives de la structure et du contenu des premiers messages de *newbies* et de leurs réponses. L'analyse de messages postés sur cinq sites « pro-ana » de langue anglaise, rassemblés sur une période d'un mois, a montré que tous les messages de *newbies* ont reçu une réponse et que dans 57 % des cas, cela a mené à des discussions entre les nouveaux arrivants et d'autres membres. Nous avons pu identifier un schéma récurrent d'entrée réussie sur ces forums. Les messages couronnés de succès contiennent suffisamment d'informations sur les *newbies* pour permettre leur identification par les autres membres, formulent des demandes explicites de soutien ou de conseils, de manière à placer les membres établis dans des rôles de guide ou de gardien de la communauté, et sont écrits de façon à reproduire les règles de comportement du site et son cadrage idéologique concernant les troubles alimentaires (un problème nécessitant une guérison ou bien un choix de vie). L'étude met également en évidence le double rôle que jouent ces sites, consistant à la fois à offrir le soutien d'une communauté et à servir de plate-forme de rencontre pour ceux qui cherchent un partenaire dans leur pratique des troubles alimentaires.

#### ***Entrées d'index***

***Mots-clés*** : troubles du comportement alimentaire, *newbies*, discours, identité

***Keywords*** : online, eating disorder, newbie, discourse, identity